

STEPHEN'S DEFENSE AND THE WORLD MISSION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

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In Acts 1-5 the early Christian community appears as virtually a united group, located solely in Jerusalem. It remained in close conformity with traditional Jewish customs and institutions, including temple worship. The first Christians were disliked, distrusted and harassed, but generally tolerated by Jewish authorities. From Acts 8 onward the reader learns of disharmony, uncertainty, dissension and factionalism within the earliest Church. He is told of movement away from Jerusalem, the eventual inclusion of Gentiles and the progressive loosening of ties with traditional Jewish ways and institutions. The Jewish Christians were subject to "a great persecution" (8:1) from their national leaders. What brought about this changed situation? Luke seems to imply that the events he records about Stephen in chapters 6 and 7 were largely responsible. But how and why the Stephen incident altered the life, attitudes and circumstances of the early Christians is not immediately evident.

Much has been said about Stephen and his bold defense.¹ I propose to focus attention upon three features of the Stephen-history that I believe had much to do with the changes in attitudes and actions by both the first Christians and their Jewish countrymen. These involve Stephen's cultural background, his view of the scope of God's presence and activities, and his understanding of the person and work of Jesus.

I. STEPHEN, THE HELLENISTIC JEW

Stephen is introduced as one selected to deal with problems of special concern to the "hellenists" of the Jerusalem Church. His name is Greek. His speech employs literary forms, ideas and emphases that suggest the influence of a culture other than that of OT Judaism.

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¹See B. W. Bacon, "St. Stephen's Speech: Its Argument and Doctrinal Relationships," *Biblical and Semitic Studies* (Yale Bicentennial Publications; New York: Scribner's, 1902) 213-276; M. Simon, *Saint Stephen and the Hellenists* (London: Longman, Green, 1958); J. Bihler, *Die Stephanusgeschichte* (Münchener Theologische Studien; München: Max Hueber, 1963); M. H. Scharlemann, *Stephen: A Singular Saint* (AnBib; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1968); cf. W. Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951) 25-46; S. G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (SNTSMS; Cambridge: University Press, 1973) 129-153. See also commentaries on Acts 6-7, esp. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), and *Commentary on the Book of the Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); C. S. C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (HNTC; New York: Harper, 1957); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Acts* (New Clarendon Bible; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), and E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971).

I have dealt at length with Stephen and his speech in "The Church of Jerusalem: An Investigation of the Growth of Internal Factions and the Extension of its Influence in the Larger Church" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation; Manchester, England: University of Manchester, 1969) 98-133, 242-256.

This is not surprising, for little more than three and a half centuries earlier Alexander the Great had conquered the world militarily and had begun an ideological conquest by introducing hellenism to the peoples under his control. In the ensuing years the Jews were locked in a life-and-death struggle against absorption by this foreign, pagan tide. Although the political and religious interests of hellenism on the Jews were blocked by the successful Maccabean revolt, its influence became a permanent feature of Second Commonwealth Judaism.² Some Jews in Palestine and especially in the diaspora embraced many of its prominent features. Some renounced their Jewish heritage out of loyalty to hellenism. Others, Philo being the prime example, attempted to adopt hellenism as a framework for presenting Jewish history and religious thought.³ It is doubtful that many first-century Jews completely escaped its influence.

Several features of hellenistic Judaism are important for this study. The most obvious of these was certainly the hellenistic Jew's preference for the Greek language. The Greek translation of the OT (LXX) from which he read differed, sometimes significantly, from the traditional Hebrew Bible.⁴ As he employed Greek in his daily communication the hellenistic Jew, probably without realizing it, committed himself to ideas, means of expression and thought forms that differed from those of his Hebrew- or Aramaic-speaking kinsman.⁵ Perhaps most important, hellenism provided the Jew with contact with, an interest in, and a means of interacting with peoples and traditions other than his own. He was thus enabled to see beyond the borders of his own nation and traditions. This made it difficult for him to maintain the isolationistic, particularistic stance prominent among Jews who remained loyal to the traditional Semitic, Hebraic culture.

The murmuring over the support of hellenistic widows (Acts 6:1) was probably a relatively insignificant incident that exposed latent tensions within the early Church. The potential for this and other problems between Jewish Christian groups (later parties)⁶ lay, at least partially, in the cultural divisions of the Judaism from which

²Cf. S. Liebermann, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: 1942) and *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962); V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1959); "Prolegomena," *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, Vol. I, V. Tcherikover and A. Fuks, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957); G. Dalman, *Jesus-Joshua* (London: Macmillan, 1929).

³E. R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light. The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, repr. 1969) and *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus* (2d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1962); H. A. Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949).

⁴Cf. H. B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (2d ed.; Cambridge: University Press, 1914) 315-341.

⁵Cf. E. R. Bevan, "Hellenistic Judaism," *The Legacy of Israel*, E. R. Bevan and C. Singer, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928) 29-67.

⁶Cf. J. J. Scott, Jr., "Parties in the Church of Jerusalem as Seen in the Book of Acts," *JETS* 18 (1975) 217-227.

they had come. The emergence of this distinctively hellenistic Jewish influence within Christianity suggests the existence of a form of the new faith that viewed Jewish institutions, customs and traditions differently than did the Hebraic Christians. As a result of their distinct outlook and emphases, Stephen and the Christian Jewish hellenists with him seem to have forced both the Jewish leaders and the early Christians themselves to reassess the nature and ultimate mission of the Christian community.

II. STEPHEN'S VIEW OF THE SCOPE OF GOD'S PRESENCE AND ACTIVITIES

Among the charges against Stephen was the accusation that he spoke "against this holy place" and that, he said, "Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place" (Acts 6:13-14). This emphasis upon "place" is met by frequent references to specific places in Stephen's response.

The Judaism of Stephen's day had become increasingly "place-conscious," provincial and localized in its view of God. Palestine in general, and Jerusalem and the temple in particular, had come to be looked upon as the only places where God could be found and as the full extent of his earthly activity and concern. In the thinking of most of Stephen's Jewish contemporaries, although few if any would have acknowledged it, God's presence was restricted to Palestine or even to the temple. Consequently for many first-century Jews, for all practical purposes, God was little more than a tribal deity of the Hebrews.

Stephen's speech attempts to show that this notion was both historically and theologically incorrect. He reminded his listeners of numerous important events of the history of Israel in which God had appeared and acted outside the geographical borders of Canaan, the promised land. God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia (7:2 ff.) and to Moses in the wilderness (7:30 ff.); he blessed Joseph in Egypt (7:9 ff.), and it was in Egypt that Israel grew (7:17) and experienced God's deliverance (7:36 ff.). Even the law, the focal point of Jewish life, was not given to Israel in her own land but at Mount Sinai (7:38). Although the patriarchs lived in the land of promise, they did so as wanderers and were forced even to purchase burial plots in it (7:5, 16).

The ideal of a wandering rather than a sedentary state appears in Stephen's preference for the portable tent-tabernacle (*skēnē*) over the permanent temple-house (*oikos*), which became the worship center from Solomon's time onward. He probably found the former a more appropriate symbol of God's presence for the ever-moving, pilgrim people of God. But his language suggests even stronger sentiments.

Stephen speaks of "the tent of witness" made according to the divinely ordained pattern (7:44), but he calls the temple a thing "made with hands" (*cheiropoiētos*, v 48). Much of the sarcastic sting of this statement is lost in the English translation. *Cheiropoiētos* means far more than simply "artificial" or "made with hands"; it was the term

used most frequently by the pre-Christian translators of the OT into Greek for "idol" or "false god." Thus to the ears of Stephen's audience it came as a term loaded with negative connotations. With it, Stephen implied that in some way the temple was associated with idolatry!

Some pagan adherents of hellenistic culture attacked the enterprise of building material temples for deity. Some hellenistic Jews may have shared this same spirit.⁷ But Stephen's presence in Jerusalem, his attitude toward the OT and its religious institutions in general, and the whole tenor of his speech warn against assuming that he may have thought of the temple itself as idolatrous.⁸ Rather, his polemic seems to have been directed against the use made of the temple in his day and especially against the idea of God that the presence of the temple had helped to engender.

The temple had contributed to the nation that God's presence and activities were limited to the history and homeland ("this place") of the Jews. Stephen (in 7:42 f.) cites Isa 66:1-2 to remind his listeners that the God of the OT is unlimited in his nature and presence, that he cannot be confined to a single place. Any conception of Yahweh that does not take this into account is a false representation, unworthy of him. The reference to the Isaianic passage immediately following Stephen's description of the temple as *cheiropoiētos* carries the implied accusation that by attempting to localize God Israel was guilty of worshiping an idolatrous caricature rather than the true Yahweh of the OT.

Thus, Stephen seems to hold, God's activities in various parts of the world and the Biblical teachings about his nature proclaim Yahweh's universal presence. From the time of Moses onward Israel had rejected the revelation, proper worship, and messengers of God and created instead a nationalistic, place-centered religion. Rather than to defend or clarify statements that led to his being accused of speaking "against this holy place," Stephen attempted to demonstrate Israel's practical blasphemy in attempting to limit the limitless God to a particular place.

III. THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS

Stephen employs four terms to refer to Jesus either directly or by implication. Two of these designations, "prophet like Moses" (7:37) and "son of man" (7:56), are applied to Jesus only rarely in the NT. "The just (righteous) one" (7:52) and "Lord" (7:59, 60) are among the standard Christological titles used by the various NT writers. But Stephen's use of these four terms, taken both individually

⁷I have summarized evidence for hostility or depreciation of temples from both Gentile and Jewish writers in "The Church of Jerusalem," pp. 110-113; cf. M. Simon, "Saint Stephen and the Jerusalem Temple," *JEH* 5 (1951) 127-142, and *Hellenists*, pp. 78-97; H. Nibley, "Christian Envy of the Temple," *JQR* 50 (1959-60).

⁸Simon (*Hellenists*, pp. 87 ff.) does seem to think Stephen regarded the Jerusalem temple as idolatrous.

and collectively, suggest a distinct emphasis in his understanding of Jesus that set it apart from that of his Jewish Hebrew Christian associates.

A. *Prophet Like Moses*

Both Judaism⁹ and Christianity¹⁰ had previously identified the Deut 18:15, 18 prediction of a coming prophet like Moses messianically. However, as Marcel Simon notes, Stephen, more than his fellow Christians, uses this title to stress the unity between the old and new covenants and to emphasize the place of Jesus as the restorer of the Mosaic religion, which had been adulterated by the Jews.¹¹ Stephen's allusion to Jesus as "the prophet" carries other connotations as well.

The primary function of any prophet was to proclaim the word of God and to issue a call to repentance. In addition Moses, as the "deliverer from bondage," "leader in the wilderness" and "lawgiver," was God's instrument for establishing the old order. For Stephen Jesus was the prophet of the final age to call to repentance, to deliver and lead God's people out of bondage, to announce the end time and to introduce the new order.

But for Stephen, Moses was a rejected prophet: Israel "thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?'" (7:27; cf. v 35); "our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside" (7:39). So too had the Jews of Stephen's day rejected Jesus. The final age had come; the coming of the Lord had been announced by the final prophet; the kingdom of God, spoken of by all the prophets, had been established; but Stephen says, "as your fathers did, so do you" (7:52).

B. *The Just (Righteous) One*

In fixing responsibility for the rejection and death of Jesus upon his audience, the Sanhedrin, Stephen used a second Christological title, "the just (righteous) one" (*ho dikaios*). The OT and Judaism had employed the term for God and the coming agent of God,¹² and Chris-

⁹Deut 18:15 ff. promises that as God had spoken through Moses, so he would continue to speak through prophets. However, some Jewish groups came to interpret the passage to mean that a particular prophet, a second Moses, would come; cf. 1 Macc 14:41; T. Levi 8:15; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1:64 f.; 4QTestim; 1QS 9:11. Cf. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957) 14; J. Jeremias, "Mōyses," *TDNT* 4, pp. 852 ff., esp. 862 ff.; D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956) 5 ff.; H. M. Teeple, *The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet* (JBL Monograph Series; Philadelphia, 1957).

¹⁰Jesus is associated with "the prophet like Moses" in Acts 3:22 and with "the prophet" in John 4:14; 7:40 and P⁶⁶ of 7:42. Overtones of prophet-Christology occur throughout the NT. Cf. Cullmann, *Christology*, pp. 30 ff.; T. F. Glassen, *Moses and the Fourth Gospel* (SBT: London: SCM, 1963); J. A. T. Robinson, "The Most Primitive Christology of All?", *Twelve New Testament Studies* (SBT: London: SCM, 1956) 193 ff.; Scott, "The Church of Jerusalem," pp. 227-230.

¹¹Simon, *Hellenists*, pp. 62-63.

¹²Isa 32:1; 1 Enoch 38:2; 46:3; 53:6; Ps. Sol. 17:35, 45; Wis 2:10 ff. In the Dead Sea scrolls the concept of "righteous" frequently appears: It is ascribed to God (e. g., 1QS 10:12), the "righteous teacher" (e. g., 1QpHab 5:10), and the "righteous Messiah" (4QPatr Blessings 1:3). The community called itself "the righteous ones" in 1QH 1:36; 1QS 30:20, 22; 19:14 [?]; CD 11.

tianity had used it of Jesus,¹³ God,¹⁴ and even some notable individuals.¹⁵ The OT had designated "the just one" as a sufferer, most notably in Isa 53:11, where he is identified with the suffering servant of God. Significantly the NT, in addition to Stephen's speech, uses "the just one" title in two or three other settings involving rejection, suffering and/or death.¹⁶ Hellenistic Judaism seems to have stressed the connection between "the just one" and suffering even more than other Jewish groups.¹⁷ Stephen's use of it in this setting probably reflects another distinctive of his background. Indeed, Jewish Christian hellenists were probably quite influential in the process through which early Christianity clarified its interpretation of the life and ministry of Jesus against the background of the Isaianic servant-of-God ideology.¹⁸

As Stephen employed the term, he pointedly made reference to the suffering and death of the prophets (by implication, the "righteous servants of God")¹⁹ at the hands of the Jews of old. He then placed the betrayal and murder of "the just one" ("the servant of Yahweh") in his own day as the crowning act of his nation's ignominious behavior.

Stephen had previously affirmed Jesus as the one greater than Moses. Now he placed him in the same category with the prophets who had been rejected by Israel. But he singled Jesus out as the one superior to the prophets. In adopting the title "the just one" Stephen identified Jesus as the suffering Messiah in the highest sense. He probably intended to ascribe to him a state of piety and innocence²⁰ and deliberately used a term not infrequently associated with God himself.

¹³Acts 3:14; 22:52; Jas 5:6; 1 John 2:1 (where, although *dikaios* is used without an article, the context demands it be taken as a *terminus technicus*).

¹⁴John 17:25; Rom 3:26; 1 John 1:9; Rev 15:3; 16:5, 7; 19:2; and possibly 2 Tim 4:8, where "the just judge" may refer either to the Father or to the Son.

¹⁵Some OT saints, Matt 3:17; 23:28; a general class of people (e. g., Luke 12:27; Rom 3:10 [none are *dikaios*]; Jas 5:16; 1 Pet 4:18; and the quotation from Hab 2:4 in Rom 1:16, Gal 3:11 and Heb 10:38); a number of named individuals (such as Zechariah and Elizabeth, Luke 1:6; Joseph, Matt 1:19; John the Baptist, Mark 6:20; Simeon, Luke 2:25; Abel, Matt 23:35 and Heb 11:4; Lot, 2 Pet 2:7-8; Cornelius, Acts 10:22; Joseph of Arimathea, Luke 23:50; and others). James the brother of Jesus is frequently called "James the just" in early Christian literature (e. g., *Gos. Heb.*; Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.4; *Gos. Thom.*, log. 12).

¹⁶Acts 3:14; 7:52; Jas 5:6 and possibly 1 John 2:1-2.

¹⁷Note that LXX translates Isa 3:10, "Let us bind the righteous one (*ton dikaiou*), for he is burdensome to us," instead of the traditional rendering, reflected in the RSV, "Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them."

¹⁸It is noteworthy that another Jewish Christian hellenist, Philip, used an Isaianic servant passage, Isa 53, in presenting Jesus to the Ethiopian, Acts 8:23 ff. But note that M. Hooker (*Jesus the Servant* [London: SPCK, 1967] 10, 122, 150) finds no reason to link *dikaios* with "the servant" of Isaiah.

¹⁹Cf. "his [my] servants the prophets," Amos 3:7; Zech 1:6.

²⁰So G. Shrenk, "*dikaios*," *TDNT* 2, pp. 188-189; but contrast Simon, *Hellenists*, p. 65.

C. *The Son of Man*

Other than in Stephen's speech, the title "son of man" is used only in the synoptic gospels and there only by Jesus himself. The origin of the term, whether it is a collective or individual designation, the relation between the son of man and the Messiah, and the authenticity of the son-of-man sayings attributed to Jesus remain points of scholarly debate.²¹ Nevertheless, the significance for this study of the references to Jesus as son of man in Acts 7 is only indirectly affected by these discussions.

Dan 7:13-14 is an important part of the background of Stephen's use of the term. Here the son of man comes "on clouds of heaven" to "the ancient of days." He receives a universal and eternal reign. By identifying Jesus as the son of man, Stephen effectively removed him from the role of a purely earthly, strictly nationalistic figure; he ascribed to Jesus the place of spiritual honor, glory and rule at the right hand of God in heaven and implied that his is a limitless domain.

All other references to Jesus at the right hand of God²² portray him in the sitting position. Stephen claimed to see him standing. Numerous suggestions have been made to explain this difference.²³ R. Pesch seems to me to be correct in affirming that

the general structure of Acts seems to hold the key to the problem. Stephen's speech and martyrdom mark the book's turning point, the passing of the good news from the Jews to the Gentiles. The standing of the Son of man refers to his position as condemning judge. . . . Acts 7:55-56 would say that the Son of man has risen to pass sentence of condemnation against His people who are guilty as charged by Stephen. Thus, Jesus' judgment marks a turning point in Salvation-history, the passing of the proclamation of the good news from the Jews to the Gentiles.²⁴

²¹These discussions are summarized by H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (3d ed.; London: Lutterworth, 1963) 31 ff.; *Darius the Mede and the Four World Empires in the Book of Daniel* (Cardiff: 1935) 62 n. 2; and *The Servant of the Lord* (London: Lutterworth, 1962) 62 n. 4; A. J. B. Higgins, "Son of man—*Forschung* since 'The Teachings of Jesus,'" *New Testament Essays, Studies in Memory of T. W. Manson*, A. J. B. Higgins, ed. (Manchester: University Press, 1959) 119 ff.; *Jesus and the Son of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1964) 13 ff.; M. Black, "The Son of Man Problem in Recent Research and Debate," *BJRL* 65 (1963) 305 ff.; F. H. Borsch, *The Son of Man in Myth and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) 22 ff.; M. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967) 11 ff.; cf. Scott, "The Church of Jerusalem," pp. 246 ff.

²²Acts 2:25 (=Ps 16:8), 33, 34 (=Ps 110:1); 5:31; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:2.

²³Haenchen (*Acts*, p. 243 n. 2), without stating a preference, gives three interpretations: that (1) Jesus stands to welcome Stephen; (2) Jesus had risen to assume his messianic office—i. e., as an indication of the imminent parousia (so H. P. Owens, "Stephen's Vision in Acts 7:55-56," *NTS* 1 [1954-55] 224 ff.); (3) Jesus, like the angels, was originally thought to stand before God. Others have suggested that the standing position indicates a belief that Jesus rose to give evidence to vindicate his persecuted saint (C. F. D. Moule, "Sanctuary and Sacrifice," *JTS*, N. S. [1950], 1. 29 ff.; cf. Bruce, *Commentary on Acts*, pp. 168-169, and Williams, *Acts* p. 112), to act as advocate (Higgins, *Son of Man*, pp. 143 ff.), or to show that at the moment of death the individual passes into the presence of the son of man, the heavenly Christ.

²⁴R. Pesch, "Die Vision des Stephanus, Apg. 7, 55 f. im Rahmen der Apostelgeschichte," *BibLeb* 6 (1965) 92 ff., 170 ff.; cited from and the above summary taken from J. J. Collins' abstract in *NTA*

Stephen's reference to the son of man is probably reflective of Jesus' own use of the term in Mark 14:62 (which combines imagery from Dan 7:13-14 and Ps 110:1). There is, however, a significant difference between Acts 7:56 and Mark 14:62 in the tense of certain verbs. Whereas Jesus referred to the son of man's glory as something the high priest would see in the future (*opsesthe* in Mark and Matt 26:64, *estai* in Luke 22:69), Stephen claims to see it as a present reality (he uses the perfect [*hestōta*] and the present [*theōrō*] tenses). For Jesus, speaking before his death, glorification was still in the future; for Stephen, testifying after the resurrection and ascension, it was an accomplished fact.

As the title "the just" carried the connotation of the suffering of the Isaianic servant, so the son-of-man title implies the glory and dominion described in Dan 7:13 and Ps 110:1. The suffering of the Messiah had been a necessary prelude to Jesus' glory and dominion, the honor appropriate for the obedient servant/son of man. As a later hellenistic writer put it, he who had been made "perfect through suffering" (Heb 2:10) and who had "endured the cross, despising the shame," is now "at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2).

Stephen and other Jewish Christian hellenists probably also found special significance in the ascription of *limitless* dominion to the son of man in Dan 7. Such an emphasis would have been appealing to hellenistic thought in general and in harmony with the emphasis upon the universal nature of God found throughout the Acts 7 speech. William Manson presents convincing arguments for believing Stephen's conviction that Jesus, as the son of man on the throne of the universe, is at the heart of his view of religious history. Because Jesus is the glorified one, therefore "all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" (Dan 7:14). Jewish religious institutions have now been transcended and antiquated.

The call of the Church of Jesus was to leave the Temple and all that went with it behind, and go forward . . . with the crucified Son of man, to whom the throne of the world and the Lordship of the Age to Come belong. . . .

All the Apostles and their followers . . . must go out and, so to speak, anticipate the Son of man's coming by proclaiming Him to every nation and people of that larger world which was now included in his dominion.²⁵

In other words, recognition of Jesus as son of man may have been Stephen's way of affirming faith in a "more-than-Jewish-Messiah" who is even now ruling over all. Stephen had been accused of blasphemy

10 (1966) 210. Cf. B. M. Metzger, *The New Testament, Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965) 189.

²⁵W. Manson, *Hebrews*, pp. 31 ff. M. Simon (*Hellenists*, pp. 67 ff.) rightly objects that Manson places too much emphasis upon the son-of-man title and objects to his interpretation of it. Nevertheless, the general lines of Manson's conclusions provide a legitimate and helpful background for understanding at least an implied emphasis of the Acts 7 speech.

against Israel's God, law and institutions. His reference to the son of man is the climax of an implied countercharge against the nation for its rebellion against God (including the murder of the Messiah), narrowness of vision, and resultant misuse of religious institutions. Such behavior is now even more serious because the son of man/Messiah is already ruling over such a domain as described in Dan 7.

D. Lord

As he died, Stephen is reported to have cried, "Lord Jesus (*kyrie Iēsou*), receive my spirit. . . . Lord (*kyrie*), do not hold this sin against them" (7:59-60). Although *kyrios* may be used in a number of ways,²⁶ at least three elements in the Stephen-history assist in determining the significance he attached to it. First, the speech as a whole makes clear that Stephen regarded Jesus as the one from God who had suffered, died, been raised, ascended to the right hand, glorified, and occupies the position of absolute dominion with power and glory. Secondly, Stephen must have been aware of the use of the term by his Greek-speaking contemporaries, including pagans employing it in addressing the deities of the Roman emperor cult and the Jewish translators of the LXX using it as a designation for the God of Israel. In addition, as an associate of the Aramaic-speaking Christians of the Jerusalem Church, he must have known their habit of addressing Jesus as *mar*,²⁷ the Aramaic equivalent of *kyrios*. Thirdly, Stephen used the term in prayer, requesting the one greater than Moses and the prophets, the righteous Messiah, the heavenly son of man who is at the right hand, to receive his spirit and remit the sins of his murderers. Although a Jew zealous for his monotheistic heritage, Stephen does not seem to be afraid that using *kyrios* as he did might cause him to be saddled with an ascription of deity to Jesus that he did not intend.²⁸

Two general observations may summarize Stephen's concept of Jesus. First, there seems to be an element of Christological progression in the speech. From the term "prophet," which is centered around the human and earthly ministry of Jesus, the speaker moves to the title "the just," which is pregnant with overtones of suffering and rejection that brings salvation to many. "Son of man" emphasizes the exalted state and universal rule of the Messiah, and "Lord" further

²⁶BAG, pp. 459 ff.; W. Fürster, "kyrios," *TDNT* 3, pp. 1039 ff.; Cullmann, *Christology*, pp. 195 ff.; cf. F. F. Bruce, "Jesus is Lord," *Sola Deo Gloria, New Testament Studies in Honor of William Childs Robinson*, J. McDowell Richards, ed. (Richmond: John Knox, 1968) 23 ff.; Scott, "The Church of Jerusalem," pp. 235-242.

²⁷*Mar* appears in such prayer contexts as the "marana tha" formula in 1 Cor 16:23; *Did.* 10:6; cf. *Rev* 22:20. See Cullmann, *Christology*, pp. 209 ff.

²⁸Hence Bruce is certainly correct to conclude that the address of Stephen's prayer "is surely an early, if tacit, testimony to the early Christian belief in our Lord's essential deity," *Commentary on Acts*, p. 171.

stresses his absolute, unlimited authority and ascribes deity to him.

Secondly, much of the force of Stephen's speech is actually presented around his portrayal of Jesus. This point was fully understood by his Jewish audience. They realized he was accusing them of adding to the crimes of their fathers—i. e., the rejection of Moses, of the divine plan for worship, and the message of the prophets—the ultimate crime of rejecting the prophet greater than Moses, the just servant of God who is even now established in heaven as the son of man at the right hand, the Lord himself. It was this accusation that turned the council into an execution party.

IV. STEPHEN AND THE MISSION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Behind Stephen's speech lies the conviction that the people of God must yield their allegiance to him, submit to his will, and reflect his nature and concerns in their activities and attitudes. This is precisely what Stephen accuses Israel, the people of God of old, of failing to do. They had rebelled against God and disregarded or misinterpreted his directives. Their way of life and relations to other groups indicated a narrow, restricted view of God's being and concerns. This mental concept of God was, for Stephen, so different from what he is really like that it was an idolatrous substitute for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Hence, Stephen affirms, the people of God of old had rejected God's person and failed to fulfill their mission.²⁹

But Stephen was also concerned for the new people of God, his fellow Christians. From his vantage point provided by a cultural background different from that of the majority of the Jerusalem Church, Stephen was able to perceive a potential danger hidden from his Hebrew Christian associates. To the hellenist, the Christians' remaining in Jerusalem and continuing attachment to Jewish nationalistic institutions such as the temple could lead them into the same errors of attitude and action that had ensnared Judaism. Jesus the Messiah had commanded a worldwide mission that included making "disciples of all the nations" (note the plural, Matt 28:19) and that extended beyond Jerusalem "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). But the young Church had not obeyed. The geographical, cultural and religious provincialism of their Jewish background had stood in the way.

Stephen's speech implies that by remaining in Jerusalem and sharing some of the same nationalistic prejudices and attitudes as their Jewish neighbors, his fellow Christians were to be included in the judgment the son of man stood to pronounce. It was the special responsibility of the Christians, the new people of God, to go out and proclaim the universal saviorhood and kingship of Jesus, the more-than-Jewish son of man/Messiah. The time for making a beginning had passed.

Thus Stephen's speech provides a theological basis and mandate

²⁹Note that Paul, in Gal 3:8, regards that part of the Abrahamic covenant that establishes Abraham's descendants as the means through which blessing would come to all nations (cf. Gen 12:3) as "the gospel."

for the world mission of the people of God, for an expansion of Christianity that seeks to bring all peoples, nations and languages under the domain of the suffering, glorified, ruling son of man/Messiah. It was thus in (1) a proper understanding of the nature of God, (2) a realistic view of the history of the people of God, and (3) a demonstration of the role played by Jesus Christ in the totality of God's saving work in history that, according to the book of Acts, the Christian missionary movement had its genesis.

Subsequent events recorded in Acts demonstrate the practical implications and effects of Stephen's missionary theology and challenge. The Jews saw it as a threat to their nationalistic institutions, cultural and racial integrity, comfortable way of life, and assumed place of privilege before God. Consequently they killed Stephen and unleashed a "great persecution" against the Church. Christians, some probably reluctantly, began to grasp the import of Stephen's words. Acts 8 records the beginning of the worldwide mission of the new people of God that literally carried them from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and the end of the earth.